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# Helping Strangers May Help Teens' Self-Esteem

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*When teens step out of their comfort zone to help people they don't know, they feel confident.*

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At the start of the new year, parents may encourage their teens to detox from social media, increase exercise, or begin a volunteer project. While kids may bristle at the thought of posting fewer selfies, surveys indicate 55 percent ([https://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/05\\_1130\\_LSA\\_YHA\\_SI\\_factsheet.pdf](https://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/05_1130_LSA_YHA_SI_factsheet.pdf)) of adolescents enjoy volunteering. And according to a recent study, when it comes to helping others, teens may benefit psychologically from spending time helping strangers.

The study, published in December in the *Journal of Adolescence* ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321108692\\_Longitudinal\\_Change\\_in\\_Adolescents%252527\\_Pro](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321108692_Longitudinal_Change_in_Adolescents%252527_Pro)s suggests that altruistic behaviors, including large and small acts of kindness, may raise teens' feelings of self-worth. However, not all helping behaviors are the same. The researchers found that adolescents who assisted strangers reported higher self-esteem one year later.

"Surprisingly, teens who helped friends and family members did not report the same emotional change," says Dr. Laura Padilla-Walker (<https://fhssfaculty.byu.edu/FacultyPage/lpw22>), a psychology professor at Brigham Young University and one of the study's researchers.

The study, which included 681 adolescents between the ages of 11 and 14, examined how helping, sharing, and comforting others affected teens' self-confidence. Between 2008 and 2011, the researchers surveyed the study participants yearly. Questions like "I help people I don't know, even if it's not easy for me," and "I voluntarily help my neighbors," helped researchers assess the various ways teens support others, while statements like, "I am satisfied with myself," and "I feel useless at times," helped the researchers evaluate the teens' self-esteem.

Padilla-Walker says the study findings suggest there's something unique about leaving one's comfort zone to support someone you do not know.

"Helping a stranger is more challenging than assisting a friend, and when teens take this risk, they feel more competent," she says.

For many teens, the turbulent adolescent years bring social and emotional challenges like learning to resolve conflicts with friends, coping with peer pressure, and dealing with rejection. These newfound stressors can rattle their self-esteem. Witnessing their kids' angst can be painful for parents who feel unsure how to help. However, Padilla-Walker says helping teens find ways to feel more self-assured can be immensely valuable.

In fact, volunteering may do more than boost personal morale; studies (<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/volunteering-may-be-good-for-body-and-mind-201306266428>) show altruism can help people connect socially, which may prevent loneliness, as well as alleviate mental health concerns, like depression.

These psychological benefits may be especially significant for teens, as studies (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/29/anxiety-and-depression-are-primary-concerns-students-seeking-counseling-services>) show anxiety among adolescents has risen in the past five years. A recent mental health survey, conducted on college campuses around the nation, found that over 50 percent (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/03/29/anxiety-and-depression-are-primary-concerns-students-seeking-counseling-services>) of students seeking psychotherapy suffered from anxiety. Research (<https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2017/09/20/one-four-girls-depressed-age-14-new-study-reveals/>) also shows that by the age of fourteen, 25 percent of teen girls and 10 percent of teen boys struggle with depression.

According to the American Psychological Association (<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/bul-bul0000138.pdf>), young adults now face greater social and economic challenges than did previous generations. Between 1989 and 2016, over 40,000 college students completed a survey measuring their tendencies towards perfectionism.

Today's young adults are more competitive and inclined to be perfectionists, expecting more of themselves and others. Perfectionism seems particularly harmful when one feels pressured to meet unrealistic expectations set by others. The researchers found that this "social" perfectionism makes students more susceptible to psychiatric concerns like eating disorders, depression, and anxiety.

"With the vast amount of information on the internet and social media, adolescents may feel like every choice they make — big and small — is an opportunity for failure. Even worse, they may fear that this failure is permanent," says Dr. Abigail Marks (<http://sanfranciscotherapyconsultation.com/>), a clinical psychologist in San Francisco who works with parents and teens.

While altruistic acts may bolster teens' wellbeing, many adolescents may reject the idea that they need a confidence boost.

"Recommending anything that may improve a teenager's behavior always carries the risk of seeming condescending or critical," says Marks. And when it comes to volunteering, suggestions made by parents about "who" and "how" to help can sound like a demand, not an opportunity.

Instead, Marks suggests that families discuss potential volunteer projects together. Even though it may seem impossible to communicate with a teenager at times, when asked to share their opinions they often develop interest. And connecting with this curiosity can help them identify an activity they value.

Of course, like many of us, teens may feel as if there aren't enough hours in the day to take on a new responsibility like a lofty volunteer project. However, virtual volunteering, such as donating to a "Go Fund Me" campaign or writing an advocacy letter can also be worthwhile. The non-profit organization, DoSomething (<https://www.dosomething.org/us>), also lets youth help remotely. By signing up on the site, they can join other volunteers and create social justice hashtag campaigns, use Instagram to support refugees, and tweet to raise awareness about education policies.

"Helping strangers doesn't need to be on a grand scale. When teens can see the benefit of their actions, they often realize how much power they have to support others," says Padilla-Walker. And that can inspire more self-confidence.

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